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Multilingualism and musical practices: Singing in “other” languages

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Multilingualism and musical practices: Singing in “other” languages

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Verbal music



People can sing very convincingly in languages that they do not speak

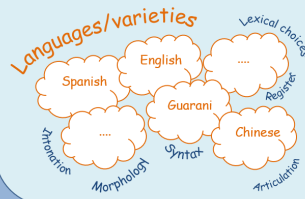
- Verbal music is **multimodal: WORDS + MUSIC**
- This also means that it can be **multilingual**

“verbal” → music with lyrics

“vocal” → produced by the human voice (e.g. humming)

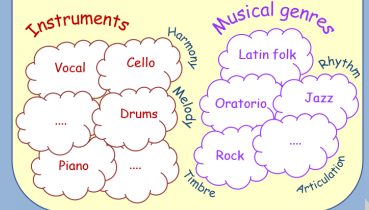
Plurilingual speakers

Are able to “employ, create and interpret different kinds of **linguistic** signs to communicate across contexts and participants and perform their different subjectivities” (Garcia & Wei 2016, p.28)



Plurimusical musicians

Are able to employ, create and interpret different kinds of **musical** signs: e.g. when composing, arranging, performing, listening to, selecting & sharing music.



Musilingual practices

Practices involving the productive, receptive, interactive or mediating engagement with **music** and one or more **languages**.

Some examples:

- composing, and arranging verbal music singing lyrics in one or more languages
- listening to music in one or more languages
- selecting, compiling, sharing, discussing music in one or more languages
- translating or subtitling lyrics
- teaching, learning, directing music in one or more languages

An example of musilingual mediation practices:

Introducing a Venezuelan Christmas carol to a UK community choir



Question 1: What forms of musilingual mediation were used?

Mediation strategies used:

- Explaining the cultural context (e.g. has lyrics in Spanish but not from Spain)
- Producing a written score (most Latin American music is orally transmitted)
- Writing an English translation of the lyrics (main consideration: had to be singable)
- Rehearsing pronunciation and rhythm patterns through spoken repetition in tempo
- Some of the Spanish verses sung as solos by a native speaker

The choral arrangement

Song section	Language	Sung by
Verse A	1. Spanish	All
	2. English	All
Verse B	1. Spanish	Solo
	2. English	All
Verse C	1. Spanish	Solo
	2. English	All
Bridge	Spanish	All
Verse A	Spanish	All

Song arranger (the researcher) and choir director drew on both **linguistic** and **musical** resources in order to make the piece accessible to British amateur singers - e.g. the only Spanish lyrics they had to learn was verse A and the bridge, the rest was sung either in English or by the soloist.

Question 2: How effective were these in facilitating intercultural awareness?

Follow-up survey 6 months later: N=45 (85% female, aged 47 to 97)

Most (67%) said they enjoyed singing the song “very much”, but only 39% would “definitely” like to learn another song in the same language.

What singers liked:

accompaniment added, different, english, enjoyed, jolly, language, learn, liked, love, maria, musical, something, song, sound, tune, verse

What singers disliked:

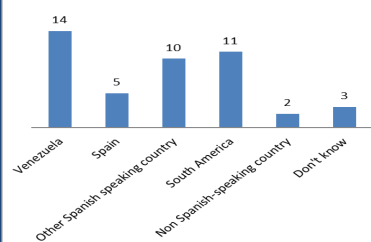
difficult, learn, lyrics, rather, words, found

☺ Singers enjoyed doing something different. They particularly liked being accompanied on a *cuatro* (small Venezuelan guitar).

☹ Negative comments mostly focused on difficulty learning the words.

A few singers also perceived the song as “babyish” (too repetitive, mentions a little donkey, etc.) → Possibly due to cultural expectations as to what a Christmas carol should be about.

Where did the song come from?



The majority remembered that the song was from a Spanish-speaking or Latin-American country. However only 14 (less than 1/3) could name the precise country.

Conclusion: Mediation had a largely positive effect on intercultural awareness. However some degree of reticence, misconceptions and ethno-centric assumptions were still apparent in a few participants.

ABSTRACT

Just like plurilingual speakers, musicians draw on their semiotic repertoire in order to express and interpret meanings and construct their identities. This work repositions multilingualism in relation to emerging theories of *multi-musicalism* within a social theory paradigm. In this new perspective, *musilingual practices* are defined as practices involving the productive, receptive or mediating engagement with music and one or more languages. In the illustrative study reported here, singers from a UK community choir were presented with a Christmas carol from Venezuela. To make the piece accessible and engaging for the singers, a number of mediation strategies were employed by the choir director and the song arranger, such as partial translation of the lyrics, musical transcription, language choice in choral and solo parts, and song teaching strategies. It is therefore an example of musilingual mediation. A survey (N=45) conducted six months after the performance showed that mediation was moderately effective in raising the singers' intercultural awareness. This example of translanguaging mediation practices in music represents only one of several promising directions that the new concept of musilingual practices opens up across the disciplinary boundaries of applied linguistics and musicology. Some of these are briefly outlined here.

What next? Exploring interdisciplinary synergies

Applied Linguistics

- moved from bilingualism to **multilingualism / plurilingualism** (Council of Europe, 2001)
- multicompetence** (Cook 2012)
- linguaging** (Swain 2006; Pennycook, 2010; Garcia and Wei, 2013)
- translanguaging** (Garcia & Wei, 2013)

Musicology

- some work on **bi-musicality** (Hood 1960); **intermusability** (Baily 2008) create conceptual equivalents: **multimusicalism / plurimusicalism**
- consider musical resources as part of an individual's semiotic repertoire
- musicking** (Small, 1999)

explore translanguaging in music (e.g. plurilingual bands)

explore transmusical performances, creations & genres

- communities of practice and situated learning** (Lave 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1999)

online language learning (e.g. Hauck 2016)

communities of musical practice (e.g. Kelly 2016)

explore online music-related practices (e.g. sharing, & commenting)

explore multilingual / multimusical practices within & between musical communities

New research directions

- Multicompetence in musicians (especially in plurilingual contexts)
- Musical translanguaging
- Communities of practice in multilingual / multimusical contexts
- Music in relation to intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship

References:

Available as a separate handout.

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